



## **Oral History Interview with Bette Vidina**

Chicago NOW Membership Chairperson  
Willing volunteer for many women's causes.

Conducted at Bette Vidina's home  
November 21, 2012

### **Interviewer: Kendall Klitzke**

A Columbia College Chicago Student  
In Dr. Erin McCarthy's Oral History Methods Class

For Chicago Women's History Center's  
Documenting Women's Activism and Leadership in the Chicago Area  
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Kendall Klitzke: Alright, I think we're rolling. I can hear it, so. Okay, so, this is Kendall Klitzke, and I am interviewing Bette Vidina on November 21, 2012 at her home in Chicago, and what would you say that your years as an activist would be? Just for the sake of the intro [laughs].

Bette Vidina: I think I joined Chicago NOW in about 1969, and for a while you're very fearful about going because you never know, these people might be crazy, and I didn't get to be active, not right away, but by '70, '71, '72, '73, in there.

K.K.: And then when would you say you sort of stopped?

B.V.: Well, see, I sort of stopped because I decided I would go to college, so I started going to college in 1973.

K.K.: Okay, so those were, those were your peak years.

B.V.: I went to college—I went to Northeastern Illinois University and I started in 1973, and I went days, and I became a waitress, so I was working as a waitress at night, so I was pretty busy.

K.K.: Okay, and so that was just like for the introduction. Okay. So, what year were you born?

B.V.: 1940.

K.K.: [Laughs] And where were you born?

B.V.: I was born in Chicago.

K.K.: And where were you raised?

B.V.: Mostly in this house [laughs].

K.K.: In this house?

B.V.: In this house, yes. My father bought this house in 1949. [voice cracks] I'm going to burst into tears. It'll be okay. Yes. Okay.

K.K.: Okay, and so what year was your father born?

B.V.: My father was born in 1901.

K.K.: And where did he come from?

B.V.: My father was born in Berlin.

K.K.: And when did he immigrate?

B.V.: He was a baby.

K.K.: He was a baby?

B.V.: He was a baby.

K.K.: And so, what year was your mother born?

B.V.: My mother was born in 1900. She was about five, my mother was from Austria.

K.K.: Austria?

B.V.: Yes.

K.K.: Okay, yeah, and so she was about five when she came to the states?

B.V.: She was about five, yes. My grandmother came ahead of time with other older children, and these two were her youngest children. So, she had two older children, and this—my mother, and my **Uncle Gus**— [begins to cry] and then she had two children and she—[microphone makes noise].

K.K.: Okay. And so, what is the earliest memory that you have of your parents?

B.V.: My parents have been dead for a very long time. Well, I sort of remember where we lived before I lived here; we lived in an apartment, so I was nine. I was nine when we moved here, and I remember living there, so, I don't know, just being in our other apartment.

K.K.: What was the role of your mother growing up?

B.V.: Okay my mother was a regular, real housewife and she, before we lived here, when the war was going on, I had an Uncle, my **Uncle John**, who was the oldest of the children, he was a pharmacist and I know my mother went off and worked, all the sisters they went and they worked in the drug store, which I kind of have a vague memory of the drug store, although I don't remember where it was. So, she mostly stayed home and did regular, real housewife stuff. Although she had been a beautician before she got married, so she mostly, she never—besides working in Uncle John's store during the war—she never worked. She didn't drive, she stayed home and was a dutiful wife and mother, and my father was a man who wasn't very nice to her.

K.K.: Did you have other siblings, or were you an only child?

B.V.: No. My parents got married in 1925, and just about nine months later my sister was born in 1926, and then I was not born until 1940, so my sister—my mother died in 1957, my sister died in 1962, [begins to cry] then my father died in 1960, I don't know 1970. [phone rings] Let me see who this is.

[Speaks on phone]

Okay.

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: So, my sister was quite young when she died, she was thirty—she died in 1962—she was about thirty-five.

K.K.: And what is your favorite memory of your sister, when you were growing up?

B.V.: Well, you know, my sister was a woman who was very, very smart. Unfortunately, she had rheumatic fever as a child, just when she first went into high school. She was a person who should have gone to college and should have done great things, but unfortunately, because she had this little—this health problem, a lot of that didn't happen and so she—Jesus, the woman was a file clerk, and since my father was kind of a cranky, old guy, the idea of her going to school or anything like that, I don't know that that ever came up. So, one of the things I've often thought, was that had she lived, she would have been right there with us, doing all that NOW stuff. So, she was not like my mother. She probably was a woman who would have been very self-actualized if she had had the opportunities. And, actually, as an adult she was well, she wasn't sickly I mean, or anything like that, and she was quite active, and she worked, and she got married, and never had any children before she died, so she dragged me around a lot. You know, I'd go off and do stuff with her. And I was also very popular with her boyfriends who would take me places and buy me stuff. I mean, she's twenty, I'm five. So, I have good memories of her. Smart lady though, too bad.

K.K.: Did she sort of inspire you?

B.V.: Well, I hadn't thought about that, but I know I had thought that she would be the way I was, she would have been that person, she would have been in NOW, she would have been doing things, she would have, even now, she'd be hanging around with all my friends. Yeah, we have good memories of her, but right off-hand I can't particularly tell you, but I got to go places with her. Because, you know, my parents were not really foreign, okay? I mean, my parents went to grammar school and they spoke perfect, Standard English, but we were not a family who had very much money, we didn't go out to dinner, we didn't go on vacation, we didn't do stuff. My father was an old guy, and well, I'm not too crazy about my father. But my father was not a father who would take us places. He didn't take me to the park. He didn't take me to the movies. He didn't do anything with me, so—Who are we talking about here? My sister. So, my sister did a lot of this, more stuff like that, although right off-hand I can't tell you what it might be, but I think I probably was taken out and I went to stuff more with my sister than with my mother, who among other things, when she's now—how old was she? We moved here—My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer, and she died in 1957, so she is unwell probably from the very beginning of the fifties, she is not especially well. She has her breasts removed, she's going to the doctor she's this, [makes continuing on and on noise] stuff like that. My father is not real sympathetic to any of that, so my mother is not very well, I'm getting on eighth grade and into high school, and so forth, so it is my sister, more than anybody, that I'm doing stuff with.

K.K.: So, what do you remember most about growing up in your home, in your neighborhood, as a girl?

B.V.: Well, I mean we moved here, and you know, I went to the grammar school that I can see from the front porch. I went to Amenson High School and belonged to that church down the street, which I was baptized—I was ten years old or something—baptized, Confirmed, sang in the children's choir, the youth choir, the senior choir. The thing we did though, now, my people are German, and there's an old German gymnastic organization called the Turners, and we belonged to the Turners, the Chicago Turners, CTG, which is actually a German word Chicago *Tourn de Minda*, the Chicago Turner Society or something. So most of what we did had to do with the Turners. We had our little cottage out in Turner camp, it's in Algonquin, so that's about 40 miles from here, so

we spent summers at camp and the rest of our activities probably had to do more with all those people from camp. I mean, my mother had her batch of ladies that played cards and we hung around with those ladies. Now, see, the thing here is, too, is that these ladies were much older than my mother, so my mother has this child at 40, and so she's 50 I'm ten, and her lady friends are all 25 years older than she is. So, I grew up with all of these old ladies. So, most of our activities would have to do with the Turners and stuff in the summer, other stuff, I went to gym at the Turner hall, so just sort of, you know, fairly ordinary sort of stuff where you get together with people, and go here go there.

K.K.: How long were you a part of the Turners?

B.V.: Well, I was a part of the Turners—My mother died in 1957 and I never really went to the cottage after that. My father would go, but I didn't go, and then my father sold the cottage a couple years after that. I still went to gym. I mean, I've gone to gym. I am the product of a million exercise classes, so I probably still went to gym, here, I mean I'm an adult now, and my sister **Anita** went to gym too, Anita died in 1962, I still went to gym for a while after that. I've taken exercise classes in other places though besides the Turner Hall since then, so I'm probably from the time I'm born until the time I'm about twenty-five.

K.K.: Wow. Okay, and so what is your most vivid memory from your teen years?

B.V.: [Laughs] A vivid memory. Many of our vivid memories are not so vivid anymore. Ah, you know, this church is down the street, now I stopped going to that church when my sister died because, well there's more [laughs]—My sister died and I decided to get married to this guy that my father didn't like so my father threw me out of the house, so I stopped going to church in 1962, but we mostly hung around with people from church rather than people from school, now some of them were the same, and even now, I missed it last week, but we have luncheons. I was on the—I'm always on everything, I have to stick my nose in anything. The Amenson High School Class of '58, so we had our fiftieth high school reunion in '88—no I mean 2008, [laughs] 2008—and so we had such a good time planning that, we decided we would have lunch every other month anyway, so we still do that, and now we're, I suppose, planning a 55<sup>th</sup> reunion. But I didn't go last week because I was too busy. So, even now, there are people that I went to church with, people that was baptized, confirmed with, went to grammar school with, some of these are the same people I went to high school with. I still see them with some regularity because I go to this stuff. So, probably, my most vivid memories of when I'm in school are stuff that we did at church, now this isn't necessarily—well, we always sang, I love singing, we sang in the choir, but we had all sorts of high school activities. Every once in a while, I'll say, "I don't know, there are no kids in this church now. There's little kids, little kids," but there's not this pack of high school kids that we had then. I mean, we probably had forty, fifty high school kids that drew from a number of high schools in the area. I mean, I was Confirmed with probably forty or fifty kids, now they have five, [pause] so, stuff is different now. So, mostly those kinds of activities. I mean, I went to school, my parents were kind of strict and my father was never one for like driving you around or anything and if you can't get picked up or you can't go on the bus, you know, he'd say, "Well, forget about any of that."

K.K.: [Laughs] So, who taught you about sex?

B.V.: I don't know. Nobody that I know [laughs].

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: Certainly not my mother, or my father, or my sister [laughs]. Isn't it interesting? I don't know, I don't know. I somehow came out with fairly good attitudes, but I don't know where they came from. You know, I was pretty shocked, you know, I'm going to high school in the 50s, right? We didn't even have reasonable gym classes, and, you know, for me, I've always done gym. I did gymnastics, I did dance, I did apparatus, there could have been good gym classes, and bleh, we didn't do nothing in high school. They made us take these swimming classes and then you had to—oh my God it was awful—put on ugly tank suits that they provided, you know, that didn't fit, oh it was awful, and then your hair was all wet, ugh, you know. I mean, I knew how to swim, a swimming class could have been really good for me, but they were just nothing, they were just nothing, and same thing with the exercise classes. But then we had health classes, and in health classes we would have “Crime doesn't pay” movies, “Crime doesn't pay movies”, and one day, we had a movie about sex in it, Oh my God. So, I was like sixteen or seventeen before I found out how ‘it’ happened, and I was shocked I said, “Oh, that looks ugly. I never want to do that, no, no, no, no, no. Never going to do that nasty stuff.” I don't know.

K.K.: So, what did that film tell you? So, before you were sixteen or seventeen it was just nothing?

B.V.: Yes. Nothing. Nothing!

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: You know, I mean here we had—I wonder if I was a senior by then. My mother died just before, like the second week of my senior year. She certainly never told me anything. Anita never told me anything. Nope. Nobody ever told me anything. I don't know how I found out.

K.K.: Okay, so that movie, so I guess, so what did the movie tell you? Was it? [Laughs]

B.V.: Well, how it was accomplished. I mean, I had no ide—I had *no* idea! I was shocked. I was shocked by the whole thing. Why would anyone do that? That seems, no, I don't like it. Never going to do that, no, no, no, no, no, don't like it.

K.K.: [Laughs] And so, given that was your circumstance, like when did you first acknowledge that you were a sexual being?

B.V.: I don't know, but I was a virgin when I got married, and I was 22. [Pause] It wasn't that uncommon then.

K.K.: Yeah. So, what did you want to be when you left high school?

B.V.: I don't know. I don't think I wanted to be anything. I wanted to get away from my father, but I didn't know how to do it. That was part of what I wanted to be. I wasn't making enough money at the time. You want to know how much money I was making when I first moved out?

K.K.: How much?

B.V.: Forty-five dollars a week [laughs]. And then part-time jobs now, where I make more than that in a day, barely minimum wage. In a day, a half a day. Yep, forty-five bucks a week.

K.K.: So, okay. I'm trying to stay on track with the timeline. But what did you do? So, what did you do when you left high school?

B.V.: I got a job, and I was a clerical. Oh boy, I can't remember what that first job was. I was working downtown, I had to go down to the "L" and go downtown. Remember IBM cards? Punch, punch, punch, punch. Those cards? We had lots of those cards. Must have had something to do with billing because I think we got stacks of papers and we had to pull out the proper card, which I suppose that had to do with the billing. I didn't work there for very long. I only worked there for a couple months, and then, our agent, whose name was **Mr. Levinson**, our agent for the *Metropolitan Life*, came around and I don't know, he said that he could get me a job at his office and so I did. I went and I worked there. So, I think I probably started working downtown for whatever that company was, which I can't even remember now, I started working for the Metropolitan in probably October of 1958. So, I graduated in June, I started working at that other job, whatever it was, and I started working in the insurance office in 1958, and it was 4554 North Broadway, so I'd take the Montrose bus up there, walk over to Broadway, and so that has been my field for the better part of my life, has been working in insurance. And I have some very good friends that I made in that office that I still see today. One of them just called. She didn't start until 1960, so we've only known each other for fifty-two years.

K.K.: [Laughs] Only, only 52.

B.V.: Anyway, I'm down there working in the insurance office, and they moved before too very long. We moved over to Lincoln and Lawrence, which is very close, so I worked over there, and that was where I was working when I started, when I joined NOW. I'll tell you, there's a woman who had influenced my life, and **JoAnn** too, my friend who just called, and her name was **Marge Huss**, and Marge was our office supervisor, and she was a very large woman, and she was very strict, and she taught us and made us what we are today. And every once in a while, I'll have to talk to JoAnn now that I've thought about this, she would sit over us and make sure we did everything right. And we were doing handwritten balances and stuff and we would take cash from people, we took payments, we did death claims, we did all kinds of stuff. I was just seventeen-years-old when I started! I wasn't even eighteen yet. And Marge Huss would sit on a garbage can next to us and make sure we balanced to the penny, and that we took all our cash right, and that we lined up the bills in the right direction, and I will do that today, and JoAnn, she's another one, she is so smart and so wonderful. She stayed on that job for years and years and years, she never married, and she should have been much more. We were held back by our own whatever. But, yes, Marge Huss, she was definitely an influence in my life. She was so mean to us [laughs] we would go home and cry, cry! But, when we talked about that, she trained us, we came out the best office worker, the best administrative person that you would ever want because we knew how to do it right. She saw to it, that we did it right, to the penny. To the penny. She would sit over us and would check it, and check it, and check it, and check it.

K.K.: So, she influenced your work life, but did she have any sort of influence beyond that even?

B.V.: Maybe, but I couldn't tell you what it might be.

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: She was our office supervisor though and [inaudible] were up there, and she was—Jesus, we were like, I was, I had my eighteenth birthday, so right after I started working, women could drink then, at 18, and she would make us drink Manhattans, and have a Christmas party and go and drink these perfect Manhattans, whatever that is, at her house. And everyone would be like all these young clericals that were in there, cause there was me and there was **Florence**, Florence was just a little older than I am, not much, maybe six months, and then **Eileen** came and it was the same thing. We were really young, we were like nineteen years old or something and drinking perfect Manhattans at Marge's house [laughs]. I haven't thought about any of this stuff in a long time. She was a very, large, hefty woman, and all the office supervisors then were quite old, pretty old, means they had worked for a very long time before they ever got to this lofty position, which wasn't a very good job either, but better than anything we knew. Actually, I got to be an assistant office supervisor when I was still quite young, I was twenty-seven, maybe. No one else had ever been one quite so young. It was quite a big deal, but of course we made no money because we were working for the insurance company and so forth, and I had to work in Des Plaines then, so I went to go work in Des Plaines. That's when I was going to NOW meetings, I think, I was in Des Plaines, it was a lot of driving around. And so I was assistant office supervisor, now this means that I handled a lot of cash money at the time. I mean, we would put up a bank deposit of 100,000 dollars at least every week. Ten, twenty thousand dollars in cash that I—when banks wouldn't come out and pick up these deposits for us, I went off to be assistant office supervisor in Des Plaines. I was in two other places, I can't recall where I went to two other places though, as well. Anyway, when I left, when I quit to go to school that's what I was doing. I was assistant office supervisor, someplace. It was called the Austin District, it was out that way. Oh, well someplace in there I actually left the Metropolitan for two years and then I came back. When I left, I had worked there for twelve years. I had twelve years of service and I was thirty-two or thirty-three years old. So, it may be that we had realized one of reasons we wanted to join NOW was we weren't being particularly well-treated, we weren't making very much money.

K.K.: Mhm. Yeah. So, was that the first time you experienced sexism? Or can you describe the first time you experienced it?

B.V.: You know. We probably didn't know that word, but this is what was very common everywhere then. Women worked in the office, they had low-level clerical jobs and the men did the important stuff. So, there's wasn't a woman who was a manager at that time, a manager of the whole district, there wasn't a woman who had a staff of salesman. There were just starting to be a few women who were selling, and actually, I had sold for a brief time but I didn't like it too much so I kind of left and came back. But, yes, so here it's very clear to us. You look in the office and there are all the women, very young women who are low-level, entry-level clericals, and then you have the office supervisor who is in charge of the office, but not the salespeople, and maybe the assistant office supervisor, they were, all of them, pretty old, too. Now, I was thinking, one of our great, great friends—Here I'm starting; there's me and Florence, and Eileen, and Alice. Now, Alice was much older. Alice is ten or eleven years older than I am. Let's see, she's thirty and we're nineteen then, so it was a big difference. And Alice actually, Alice was I think our Assistant Office Supervisor for a while, but most of them were way older than Alice, so that's how it was in offices. You would probably have this older woman, and Marge Huss I think she was divorced or maybe she was a widow, she didn't have an active husband at the time, and so mostly that's what you'd have. So, the people in charge of offices were your older women, and then your younger women who were clericals because we knew



they were going to get married and then they were going to get pregnant and they would be forced to or they would leave.

K.K.: So, why did you get married?

B.V.: Why did I get married? Well, that's an interesting question. I got married—He was cute, he was very cute. He drove, he had a convertible, and he came to the front door to deliver a package, and my father never liked him, but you know, you're young, and you think he's, you know, and you're going to get married anyway, and my father said, "You get married to him and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah and get out." Which I knew he would say, so I was ready to get out. We had rented an apartment and so on, but you couldn't live together then, this was 1962. So, I did get out, and we did get married. Came to find my father was right, should never have married him, but it got me out of the house! You know, it got me out of the house. He was inclined to run around and not work and stuff like that. We were only married for two years, so, same reason many people do it, even now. So, I got divorced. Well yes, anyway, that's why I got married, he was very cute. They all are. [Laughs]

K.K.: [Laughs] They all are.

B.V.: So, I got married again a long time after that. He didn't work out either.

K.K.: So, tell me about your reasons for becoming an activist.

B.V.: Well, you know I think, interestingly enough, you've ferreted some of them out. I think that many women at the time—we just began to see how we just weren't being treated very well. You know, we weren't making very much money. It wasn't even like the men were doing different stuff. It was back when the want-ads were all men-women, they weren't all just in alpha like they are now. And I think we realized that. I mean, there wasn't anybody, for the most part, then who was—I mean even if you've gone to school now, I know of several people who joined NOW and decided to go to school, I was one of them, my friend **Jean Pomykala**, Jean is about fifteen years older than I am, and Jean I started going to school at the same time and she graduated from UIC [University of Illinois at Chicago], I graduated from Northeastern [University], her son, **Conrad** graduated the same time she did, now Jean's been dead for quite a while, now here's Conrad, Conrad is my good friend and **Caroline**, her daughter and son-in-law, daughter and son, are my good friends even now. So, there were a number of people that decided they would go to school. There were a number of people who had been to school that decided to go to law school, which I actually thought about that briefly but put that out of my mind. Who can I dredge up that decided to go to—**Mary Anne Sedey**, Sedey, I just saw her. Yeah, she's not even as tall as I am and she's gone before the Supreme Court, yes! Judy was a lawyer for some reason, she managed to do that. She was a lawyer when we were active in NOW. I mean I could dredge up some names of some people that had gone to college. It wasn't all that common. [People] that had gone to college and then decided to go to law school. Probably, [pauses] **Sandy Thiel**, but she wasn't a NOW member, but I know Sandy Thiel worked for public aid. But a lot of women decided that they'd go back to school they would go to law school, and they would, you know.

K.K.: Yeah, and what women inspired you at that time?

B.V.: Oh, **Sally Miller** and **Gerry Dolan**, yes! They're both dead I think. They were NOW members, and Sally—I think they were both psychologists and a fair amount older than I am, like at least ten or fifteen years, but I believe both of them had gone back to school, I mean, they didn't go at the regular time. I'm pretty sure they were both psychologists, and you say, "Yes, I'm going to do something too." You know, so yes, they were NOW members, them and, I know Sally has been dead for a long time, Jerry moved to Florida and hasn't been heard from, so she would have to be, I would think, 85, if she were alive.

K.K.: And so, what did you want to change the most when you became an activist?

B.V.: I think we probably wanted to change our job situation. You know, I wanted to make more money, I wanted to do better stuff than shuffling these papers around and making sure I money was in the right direction, wanted to do bigger and better stuff.

K.K.: And so, obviously like you've heard, "the personal is political," and so in what way was the personal political for you?

B.V.: Oh, I don't know. You know, my father died right in there someplace, and I was not living here then, I mean I had not lived here since 1949, I was gone for nine, ten years, from the time I got married until the time my father died. So, I inherited the house and I got a little money, not too much, cause he gave all his money—It was amazing how much money the old boy had for an old guy who had never made much money and hadn't been working for a long time, but we're German, you know, we save. Anyway, I had the house, I had a little money, I had a tenant, so it looked like I could do that. And, this is sort of interesting, if you pay attention to Illinois politics, they're cranking about the scholarships that the state reps can give, I had one. I was one of those people. So, I went to City College the first year and the rest of the time I went to Northeastern. I had a tuition scholarship which really helped me a lot because I didn't have any bills or anything when I—Of course it didn't cost as much either, I lived at home, I was working. But, yes, I had one of those state scholarships. And they keep talking about how, he actually didn't have any specs he was like, "Oh, yeah, sure I'll give it to you. Okay." Nobody really wanted them too much then, but that was what put me through college was this, whatever you call it, General Assembly Scholarship.

K.K.: Because you mentioned that you joined NOW sort of out of your experience in your working environment, so is that what prompted you to join NOW?

B.V.: I think so. I think so. I mean there were other things after that. You know I was recently in a focus group and it turned out to be for Planned Parenthood and they were talking about women having other services beside abortions at Planned Parenthood, and I said, "You know, I've always had insurance, there has never been a time when I didn't have insurance." When I started out working for the Metropolitan we had insurance, I went on, even when I was in school, I had student insurance, so I've never not had insurance. I had no idea. I support Planned Parenthood. I don't even know what Planned Parenthood really does. I have never gone to Planned Parenthood, so it's after that time when you find out about some of these things about insurance for instance, I don't know if I've ever thought too much about abortion, and the other things that NOW really started to espouse, that you haven't thought about and that mostly what you've thought about probably is we know that we're not getting such a good deal on the job. We know that we are the clericals, we are the office people, we're just not making any money, we're not getting to do nothing about stuff in the office. So, I think for a lot of women that was—and then you get into other stuff. If you are

interested in the women's sports issues, which I mean, I have always been, whatever, athletic, but I've never, I don't especially care to go in team sports. I don't care to play on volleyball teams for instance, or teams, but you see, there's teams where the boys have a lot, a lot, a lot of money and the girls have nothing. You realize that for women that want to do that, that that's terribly unfair and it was just, "Oh, well. Girls."

K.K.: So what women's issues were the most important to you or became the most important?

B.V.: Well I think the most important was always employment. And then, you know, the other thing is just generally the way that women are treated. [Inaudible] you say that your consciousness is raised and you notice things about commercials, for instance, now, especially lately, all of the things that we thought were over, over in the '70s have come back to haunt us. You know, they're trying to take abortion away every time you turn around, they're trying to take women's health issues away. There have been really obnoxious commercials on TV lately with—It's pistachio nuts! You know, why do we have to zoom in on this lady's jugs? All this stuff that there was a lot of work in commercials and sexist commercials and so on which sort of petered out a little bit and now they're coming back to haunt us, saying, "No, no, no, wait a minute." So, other issues open up to you once you become aware of them. Things that you probably never thought about, whether or not we ought to be called girls. Do girls ever really get very far? Not as far as women, probably. I mean girls, to me, are pretty little. They probably are ten and under, maybe twelve or fourteen but that's it, not too much past that, they are always young women. Maybe ladies. And language, you know, language is important. Language is important.

K.K.: Yeah, and so moving forward a little bit, so describe the role that you played in NOW.

B.V.: Well, you know one of the first times, I wasn't living here when I first joined NOW, and I guess I had been flirting with the idea of it and I finally called, and I got this man, oh my God they have a male secretary, I thought that was pretty funny, now I don't know if you've ever come upon anybody that talked about **Nan Wood**, but Nan Wood was just about our oldest member at the time, and this telephone then was in her office and it was N. Wood Counters, and she was a woman who maid Geiger counters. And it was like sort of on the Southside, she lived in Hyde Park, and she had worked with Fermi in the Fermilab. So, I'm thirty, Nan is probably, then, at least sixty-five I would think, or seventy and a very tall, kind of like Eleanor Roosevelt sort, and the phone number was just her office number because nobody had any money, nobody had an office, nobody had any equipment, nothing. And so I called up and I joined and then I recall not going for a while, because you think, Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, what if they're really crazy? What if they're like this, you know—and I think bra burning had come up by then and of course no one we ever knew ever burned a bra, so your kind of fearful of going. And then, I think, I don't know if I made Joanne go with me or not, but I finally ended up in a meeting and of course **Mary Jean Collins-Robson** at the time, because she was married and hyphenated, was the President, and it was like it was thrilling. It was just thrilling because things were going on there were people talking about—oh my God it was thrilling, all of this stuff. And I can't remember where, I think we met at the Y[MCA] then, probably at the Y, and so you know, you just get sucked into it because you find out more about it and so I just got sucked into it and I think I was working is Des Plaines then, so it's a little bit of a drive too, you have to get home and get to downtown because the meetings were always downtown and for a while I was Membership Chair, so I think I took over for **Jenny Rentas** and I don't know why. I think I told you this, people were very fearful that it would be known that they were doing this, they could have lost their jobs. That's why we had the list of "frequently called numbers". This

is not the NOW membership list, the list of “frequently called numbers” and all it was, was your name and telephone number so you could contact people, you know. So, I did that, and I don’t know that I did it for very long and I’m not sure exactly when it was, but anyway, I was Membership Chair because I went around and talked to people all the time, still do. I started early, still do. So, we were doing—whatever we were doing—we were doing stuff, and then somewhere in that time, from the time I joined and moved out of my apartment and moved back in here, I think my phone was the NOW phone. Maybe I had a second phone with another number, but it was in my house. So, people would call up and we would try to see what we could do for them, and a lot of that stuff, I mean we couldn’t do anything for them because you know, there just isn’t—there’s just only so much you could do and especially then. We didn’t have any money, we didn’t have an office, we didn’t have a staff person. I’m going to turn up the heat [footsteps]. And, so, we would try and do referrals for people to help them out a little bit. So, yes, and I remember one point, I was here though, and I had two telephones, corded, two corded, two numbers, and I would be like on the phone like this [holds up two imaginary telephones to either side of her head] because of course that’s what you had to do then, “Karen, blah, blah, blah, blah, Mary Jean, blah, blah, blah, blah, Mary Ann, blah, blah, blah, blah, Karen, blah, blah, blah, blah,” and you would be talking like this on two telephones. So, you just get into stuff, and even for me, I guess people where I work they kind of knew that I was doing some stuff, but I wasn’t ever in dire danger for instance of losing my job, but there are people at work, and it could have been very, very serious for them. They could have lost their jobs. Even a bad job is better than no job at all.

K.K.: And, so, what did being Membership Chair entail for you? What were your tasks, if you will?

B.V.: Well, one of it was perhaps meeting people, greeting them, welcoming them, getting them to join, getting them to pay up, there must have been a little bit of administrative work although I don’t really recall that. I must’ve had some forms for them to fill out and a little collection of money. I can’t imagine it cost very much, I don’t remember. Just things like that little—You know maybe, trying to figure out how to get people to come to more meetings. I remember we had a thing for a while, it was, I don’t know, “Each One, Bring One,” or something, and, “Each One, Reach One,” and we would sometimes make arrangements to have dinner with people before the meeting. It’s the same thing, you know, people could be very fearful about this because this might have been the wackiest lot you could come upon in your life. Now of course for me, these are, even now, I mean, I haven’t gone to NOW meetings in years, but there are people—I’m going to have dinner with **Mary-Ann [Lupa]** tomorrow, on Thursday. I just saw Mary Ann and **Wilma [Stevens]** on Monday night for book club, there are other people, **Anne Ladky**, I mean I don’t see her very much, and actually they moved, she used to live just a couple blocks that way. So you know, there are these people—We went, do you know anything this, what do you call it, the old, fart-y, feminists group, Veteran Feminists of America? Did you ever come upon that?

K.K.: No.

B.V.: Oh, it was wonderful! They had a VFA conference in September at Alverno College. Now Mary-Ann Lupa went to Alverno College, and one of the foremothers, **Sister Read**, is still alive. She’s from Alverno. So **Mary Jean Collins** went to Alverno, she was Mary Ann Lupa’s big sister in Alverno, and then they—what was her name? Sister something-or-another. Anyway, sorry, she’s about ninety, she’s in a wheelchair. It was thrilling because there were people there that have done stuff, I mean, there’s **Mary Anne Sedey**—I said, “You’re still short”, I mean, she’s not even as big as I am. Judy Longquist she was the other one who was an attorney, she was an attorney though

already, so it was not all that common to be an attorney in 1970. Well, Judy decided to be a lesbian and she somehow managed to get pregnant, she seduced—this is a funny story. Judy Longquist wanted to have this baby, and so she, with malice of forethought, picked out a guy, seduced him, somehow, and then never had anything to do with him again, got pregnant, and Judy, she's Swedish, you know, she's a big, blue-eyed blond woman, and I think she picked big, blue-eyed blond guy, so pretty much the baby would look like her, and so she gets pregnant and she has this baby, and then she had moved to California, and she was back here for some reason, some kind of a do you know, and here comes this guy that she hasn't really seen at all, and I guess the baby was pretty little then, could have been pretty obvious by the age of the baby that this might be his child, so she quickly handed the baby over to Sue, she says, "Here Sue, you hold the baby," she handed the baby over to **Sue Doughty**, who was also a big, blue-eyed blond woman. The baby's name is **Victoria**, she's about forty-five or something now. So, Judy Longquist was our NOW attorney for a while. She's also been in front of the Supreme Court—yes, Judy wasn't there, that's too bad—but I mean there were people at this conference that I knew from Chicago, and it was thrilling to see what people have done.

K.K.: And I think you mentioned Judy when you were talking about some of your most memorable moments in NOW.

B.V.: Oh yes, that's right! Judy came down when I was arrested. Judy came down, yes. She came down when I was arrested to get me out of—I never actually was in jail, but she—I was sitting there, pretending to cry when she was getting me out of there. That's right, that was Judy Longquist.

K.K.: Can you explain the circumstances around that arrest?

B.V.: Well, okay, as far as we know, I was the only one who was ever arrested, and mind you, I've never done anything, so, pretty shocking. We used to do what we called "skulking," and skulking was driving around in the dead of night and putting up posters about activities. And these posters were mostly put up on posts and walls and fences and I think we might have had like, we had paste or something, we'd slop paste on these things, and somebody would drive, and somebody would jump out, and I was the person that was jumping out, and it may be—There was a woman named **Gerry Empinidas** [sp?], and Gerry Empinidas was a big, blond woman. She was a big Lithuanian woman, and she drove around in one of those big English cars, although the drivers had been put on the left side for the American, big, big, taxis and stuff in London. Anyway, she was driving this big car and I would jump out, put in on there and [makes wind whooshing noise], we'd go away. Well, they caught us, they caught me skulking and arrested me and they were going to give me a non-vehicular ticket or something for this skulking stuff, for posting bills illegally, I think that was it. So, somehow, I ended up in jail, I mean, I wasn't in jail, I had to go down to the police station, frankly I don't remember where that was, it was probably downtown someplace, so maybe it was Chicago Avenue. And [inaudible] Judy Longquist came and I didn't go, I didn't ever do anything as a matter of fact, I wasn't in jail that night, I never went to court I don't think, Judy got me off, yes. Judy.

K.K.: Yeah, and so what specific initiatives were you a part of during your time in NOW? I think that you mentioned the NOW Credit Project and—

B.V.: Yes. Oh, yes, the NOW Credit Project, you know—Yes, women were not getting credit, usually, because of course we weren't making very much money, and they said, well you'll just get

married and if you get married they wouldn't count your salary toward a credit card or a mortgage as a matter of fact, and so we were all going to apply for all these credit cards and aggravate them a lot if they wouldn't give them to us. And so I got, I'm pretty sure it was a MasterCard, which might have been the first card I ever got, and I bought, I still have it but I can't wear it because I'm way too fat now, I bought what I call the goat coat. It was an Afghanistan Ram coat, they were very popular then, it cost \$109. Now mind you, I'm probably making a hundred dollars a week or something, this was a big, big, big purchase for me. This coat was so beautiful, it's got the furry stuff on the inside, it still smells, oof, just like an old goat. And the outside was, like, white buckskin and it had beautiful embroidery, and it was long, it was very long, so it was down to my ankles, and I wore this with white boots, and a little white hat, and a big scarf. Oh, it was wonderful. And there are some pictures of me in places wearing that. One of them was taken in Washington D.C. at something we went to and we were with a whole lot of black people and a couple of us white ladies and me in this big white coat, coat thing, so yes it was my downfall it was the first thing I bought on the credit card, and yes, we've fallen into using those credit cards ever since then. It was probably the downfall of a lot of people, and I still have that coat. I would like to find someone who is thin enough to wear it, it's just hanging in the basement.

K.K.: And so, in addition to the NOW Credit Project, were there any other things that you worked on within NOW?

B.V.: You know, there was always ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] stuff, and I did go to the ERA March in Washington. Actually, Jean Pomykala, who's my friend who has died now, who's Conrad and Caroline's mom, we went, we flew in, in the morning, it was a beautiful day and we were all wearing white like feminists of old and carrying our signs. And it was a beautiful day and it was thrilling because there were all these people there all wearing white and marching around and sitting around fountains and stuff. So, there was ERA stuff, and I went to an ERA March in Springfield and the same thing, we're wearing white, we're carrying our signs. I think I gave all those signs away now, I gave them to UIC not that long ago, maybe last year, maybe the year before. There was an ERA March that went down Michigan Avenue and that was the year that I was hosting the San Francisco NOW Marching Band, who was just sleeping all over the house [inaudible]. Because my friend, Terry Tiernan, had moved to San Francisco and had fallen in with these people so I said, "Aw, sure, they can all come and stay with me," so there are pictures of the San Francisco NOW Marching Band, so there was ERA stuff we were doing regularly. There was a Sears, a Sears project where we were—You know, it's the same thing again here now, see in Sears, all the clericals, all the salespeople would be women and the managers would be men probably, so there would be projects at Sears where we were doing stuff to point that out to people. The telephone company, it's the same thing. You would never, ever have a male telephone operator, it was a very low-level, ill-paying job because it was loaded with women. Like the really good jobs then were the installers and those guys that climb up poles, so we would do some projects with the phone company and I don't remember what they might be, I just remember **Eleanor Protis**, who did something or other, and she was working for the phone company and she was like, not a phone operator, someplace in the office, and they didn't fire her, they just took her off her job and she just came in every day and did nothing.

K.K.: And they continued to pay her?

B.V.: Yeah, and I don't really remember an awful lot about that right now, but yeah. Eleanor Protis, she made some kind of a complaint and that's what she did then, she did nothing all day long, she

came in. They couldn't exactly fire her, I guess it would be—well, they didn't anyway, so for a long time she just sat around and did nothing. But, you can see now, it would not be unusual to find an operator who was a man, it would not be—And I don't know about installers, but there probably are women who are installers, I mean there are women everywhere working in the phone company now, and everywhere else. Places I have no idea why they would want to do that, but you know, you want to be a firefighter, well okay, nothing I'd want to do. But, you know, there are women firefighters, there are women everywhere doing stuff now. Women are getting credit cards, and still there's a lot of things that are very difficult. I mean, right now I think there are more women going to law school and med school than there are men.

K.K.: Okay, so we were talking about the ERA a little bit, among other things, and so you mentioned that you participated in marches, did you do anything else on behalf of the ERA or was it just like the participation in the larger efforts?

B.V.: I would say not particularly, I suppose. You know, there's a whole attitude that goes along with this, too, and it continues on. So, not that I can particularly remember, I know I would occasionally do speaking engagements, I don't remember if I particularly talked about the ERA or just generally. I would say we probably were, I don't know, writing some letters, talking to some people, nothing I can particularly pinpoint at this time.

K.K.: Were there any boycotts you participated in?

B.V.: I don't think so.

K.K.: Okay, so like, so you're in NOW, you're active in the women's movement, so what prompted you to open up your home to Jane?

B.V.: They just needed people to do it, and I knew there was this weekend where we were going to be gone. And we were really fearful about that. I mean, I could have been thrown in jail for that, too. **Madeline Schwenk**, she was a NOW member and she had learned how to do abortions, and I had this figment of my imagination that Madeline was having a meeting up with her boyfriend because I think she wasn't getting along with her husband or maybe she got a divorce or something, so I gave her the keys, and we went away and went to a NOW Conference, it was south, maybe Minnesota, Minneapolis.

K.K.: And, so, was that like just the—was it the one weekend or did they use your home multiple times?

B.V.: No, they just did it once, and I don't know if they were here one day or two days, and I don't really know what they did, except I just found a little furniture moved around. Actually, I found a chair in the bathtub, and then they sent me a very lovely towel set I [laughs] used for a very long time. Marimekko towels, very nice.

K.K.: You mentioned that you went to a conference, you left and went to a conference, did you go to many of those conferences?

B.V.: Oh, yeah. Yes, we would have the Midwest Regional and the National. So, yeah, we loved going to conferences. There was, well for one you got to see other people, and some of it was really

fun, some of it—There was a little dissention going on in the upper echelons, which right off hand I can't—I was never really involved in that, but like Mary Jean Collins, she would be like running for NOW National President or some of these other people they would be running for board positions and then there would be somebody running against them and there'd be a lot of upheaval in there and you'd be staying up all night and say, "Yeah, yeah, I vote for it. Yeah, yea, whatever." So, yes, we did. We loved going to conferences.

K.K.: Did you attend, or what was your involvement with the National Conference for New Politics in 1967? Does that sound familiar?

B.V.: I don't think I went to that, that was before I was a NOW member.

K.K.: Okay. Oh yeah, yes. That is. I'm sorry [laughs].

So, you mentioned that there was conflict in the upper echelons, as you said. When was there a sense of betrayal amongst you and the other women in the movement based on differences in belief? Like what did you witness where women were conflicting with women?

B.V.: Oh, I don't know that I can speak to anything like that. I don't know.

K.K.: Okay.

B.V.: I know there's, it seems that, I don't know, there has always been a little bit of dissention between the gay women and the straight women and I don't particularly know a whole lot about that. It seems to me that gay women have a whole lot of the same issues as straight women, and I never particularly got myself into issues like that but I know, you've probably heard about the Lavender Menace, which **Betty Friedan** called them, because very often you know they would say, "Well, you're just all lesbians," and that NOW was being taken over by lesbians and that they were lesbian issues and there was stuff like that. I don't remember ever being really, seriously involved in that, that was just like stuff you would hear about. I mean, we always had some gay women in NOW; some of them [laughs], some of them are my good friends, some of them I still see, you know, it's like, now they're old gay women.

K.K.: [Laughs]

Along the same lines, what was your reaction when **Phyllis Schlafly** established STOP ERA in 1972?

B.V.: Oh, God. What an awful woman. What a truly awful woman. She's right up there with these other wackies that we have now, you know. I mean you would really have to wonder why a woman would do that. Particularly, I mean Phyllis, Phyllis was a woman who I think was very successful in business and in all sorts of areas and you would wonder why a woman who was that successful wouldn't want to help other women do that. She was, oh, yes, an awful person.

K.K.: So, you felt that sense of betrayal because it was a woman who was very outspoken against—

B.V.: Yes, yes exactly. And not only that, but a woman who particularly was espousing lives for women that wasn't her life at all. Because I think she was a—I don't know she was a professor or she was very successful in business or something and she would be out doing all of these things that she was speaking against for everyone else, and you know we'd say, "Wait a minute, what are you



doing here?” So, it was odd, we would think, for her to say these things and to do these things when that wasn’t the life she was leading. And the idea, and that was an idea then, even then, that you were just going to get married, and you were never going to work, and your husband was going to take care of you, that wasn’t her life either. Well, I think she had a husband, but she was a woman who, I think, had a serious career and so forth. So, you would wonder why she would espouse those ideas.

K.K.: So, what do you think the largest challenge you faced as an activist was?

B.V.: Well, I mean, it’s pretty hard to really get anything done by yourself, so you always need to have a group, you need to have support, sometimes you just need to have support on a personal level, which is always very important and a lot of times people, women especially, don’t realize that. But, I think more so now that you need to have all these women friends. A lot of stuff takes a long time, it takes a very long time, and that a lot of things have happened and you can look around and say that, you know, and we all have our credit cards and there’s lots more women going to college and there’s women showing up in lots of professions that, even now, years and years later, there are things that women cannot do. They aren’t making as much money, they’re not getting as much, what’s the word, you know, if a woman’s doing it it’s still not nearly as good as if a man’s doing it. They’re not getting the praise, they’re not getting the accolades. Even now, lots of things have happened, but lots of things still haven’t happened. Now, I was talking about commercials before, you know, there was a lot of carrying on about commercials and the image of women in the media and I was thinking recently that, you know, now it’s not at all unusual to see commercials where there’s men doing some of the most unusual things, changing babies in commercials. And a lot of Asian people and black people and whatever are showing up in commercials and that’s taken a very long time, that’s only become very common, in what, the last five years? Maybe ten, maximum? Those were, along with the images of women was the images of other people as well. So, then, because I said now we have the ladies in the pistachio commercial, which, for some reason, we need to zoom in on her chest, then a lot of things—they want to take it back, they want to take it back from you. So, I think a lot of things have changed, a lot of things that are pretty common now. I was talking, this is my friend’s son’s girlfriend, and so she’s about twenty-three, twenty-four, and she could not believe when we were talking about credit, she said, “Oh, they’re always trying to give us that credit,” and ah, but they didn’t used to! And I told her the story about how I bought the coat with the credit card and about the ads, how the ads weren’t always alphabetized like they are now. And there are young women, especially—and young men I suppose—who don’t realize that. You know, because it’s so different now in a lot of ways, they don’t realize that. But, I think they’re trying to take it back. I think people are trying to take it back.

K.K.: What was distinctive about the Chicago women’s movement?

B.V.: Oh, we were way more wonderful than those in other places!

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: I don’t know. I think there is sort a Midwestern tone. I think, you know, people in New York think they’re the center of the universe and we knew we were—I think there is a rather more moderate, I suppose might be a good word, tone of people in the Midwest. In Chicago, we had Chicago NOW, we had the Chicago Women’s Liberation Union, you know they had a rock band, they really were the chain service. So, they did consciousness raising, now I never really joined a

consciousness raising group, but they had started out that way, they were doing things a little differently than we were. Although, as years went by we got to be rather more close to a lot of them. I don't know, I think it's just the Midwest is different from New York or California, for instance, they just a little different attitude about stuff and it's rather more moderate, it's not as wild and crazy, more organized in little different kinds of ways.

K.K.: Describe your average day as a women's rights activist. Like when you were active in the—

B.V.: This is a very long time ago!

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: Well I mean, you know, I was working then so, I mean, I would do all your stuff and then go to work and maybe try to sneak in a few phone calls. Actually, one of the things—I hadn't thought about that—I used to steal postage. I used to steal postage from the office so I could send stuff out because we never, ever had any money. You know, we never had any money to run our office or to do anything so we would steal postage, maybe make some phone calls, and then you'd dash home and then you'd go to a lot of meetings and talk to a lot of people on the phone and go here go there and you know, I mean it could be almost every night, every night of the week that you were going to meetings or going here or there, doing stuff, so we were very busy. I'm not kidding when I'm talking about these two telephones. I was on the phone with two people, going back and forth like this, talking on the phone. So, it was just very busy, it was all the time for a while there. I mean, and that's probably why when I decided to go to school I just, I couldn't do that stuff then because I was going to school five days a week and I was working four nights a week, so I really couldn't do that. So, it was a very busy schedule. I mean, almost everyone was working full time, regular, real day job. And then we had the women who were married, they had children. So, it was a lot of organizing, trying to figure out when you're going to do that stuff.

K.K.: Yeah, and so what compelled you to further your education and go back to school?

B.V.: Well, it's what we've just talked about here. It seemed to me that I was never ever going to get away from the office of the Metropolitan Life. Although, well actually I never actually did terrifically well after I graduated from college but I did, actually, get into a better job because it just simply called for a college degree. I think, well, I also flirted with the idea of going to law school because there was so much—It seemed like that would be a way you could really do more, but I realized I probably couldn't do that and I didn't want to go to school anymore. So, it was just all of the things we've talked about. And I think my desire to get a better job to do better, I mean, here I was, I had gotten married when I was twenty-two and divorced by the time I was about twenty-five or twenty-six, I wasn't married then. I did get married again when I was forty, which also ended in divorce, but probably the realization that you're now going to have to take care of yourself for the rest of your life, so you need to be able to do that. So, I think I went to school for all those reasons and you were in an atmosphere of other people that wanted you to do that and encourage you to do it. I mean, here we have—I'm thirty-three, Jean is, I don't know, forty-five or six or something, I don't know, and we're taking ourselves back and we were going to school, we are going to college and we're this old.

K.K.: What moment during your time as an activist gave you the most fulfillment?

B.V.: Oh, I don't know. I don't know.

[Laughs]

K.K.: Was there a moment where you felt, like in the moment, that you were really doing something?

B.V.: You know, not that I can really remember at this time. It was a very long time ago, we're talking about forty years. Well, I mean I felt pretty good the day I graduated from college. That was good. It was a good time. It didn't turn out to, as I said, it didn't turn out to benefit me really, really well, but it did get me a couple jobs that I would not have gotten before. No, I'm sorry, I don't know.

K.K.: No, it's okay. No, that's totally okay. Who, if you had one, who was your favorite President during your time as an activist?

B.V.: Of the United States? I don't remember.

[Laughs]

K.K.: [Laughs] Because there are a lot of guys [pauses, laughs] during those times, so how did the failure of the ERA, that was in 1982, how did that affect you?

B.V.: Well, frankly, I don't know if it affected me at all. I think you began to see that even without the ERA, that all of that stuff was going to happen, and actually, it pretty much has by now. I mean, there had been a lot of work done on it, a lot of time, money, energy had been spent on it, it's sort of disappointing. But, you know, there are people that just said that's [inaudible] we're going to continue on and we'll get it in other ways, which has mostly happened.

K.K.: So more hopeful as opposed to—

B.V.: Yeah.

K.K.: How did the job of being an activist differ from what you expected it to be?

B.V.: Listen. I had no idea when I joined [laughs] what I would be sucked into. I mean you just have no—I do, I remember very vaguely going to that first meeting with Mary Jean, and as you know, Mary Jean is five-foot tall, too, and she was, “Bleh-meh-bleh-bleh-meh.”

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: I mean, it was thrilling! There was stuff going on here. We had no idea what we would get into. I mean, I don't know that I was ever particularly shy in retiring, but there were people that were, you know, that really came out. So I think we had no idea, we had idea the stuff we would do. I don't know if you've—I know Mary Ann Lupa was just interviewed Monday, actually, and you know Mary Ann was there with Mary Jean when they went into the Berghoff's men's-only grill, and they were frightened. Those two, and some other people, but not me, they did stuff they never considered doing before, but they were together, they had each other. So, I think we had no idea. We had no idea. I mean, I was on TV shows occasionally, I was interviewed on TV shows and did a little speaking here and there, which frankly I don't really remember, but I know I did a little anyway. I

mean, there are people who would go out and do things they never considered before, and even marching around, I mean imagine getting up and going to D.C. and marching around in D.C., all sorts of things that nobody ever thought they would do.

K.K.: And how do you think being an activist helped you grow as a person?

B.V.: Well it turned me into an even bigger bigmouth than I already was.

K.K.: [Laughs]

B.V.: Well, let me see, you know a lot of it is an attitude. I mean, you come out of it, even though I haven't been to any NOW meetings in a very long time, I, for the most part, maintain my membership, you maintain the ideas, you can spot something right away and you might say, "Wait, that's really sexist," or, "That's really unfair," or, "That's really something," because you know these things, you have learned these things, they are ingrained in you, and I think you lead your life a little bit differently. And it may be that you either—some people you may simply avoid because you think that they are such low-lives that you would never want to spend five minutes with them, sometimes that's the route you can take, sometimes you can just say to people, "Look, listen, you can't do that, you can't act that way, you can't say that, you can't do that, you can't whatever," and that goes on with you for the rest of your life. So, I think that we've done that. I think that we've looked for people who agree with us anyway and maybe avoid people that don't. But, you know, really calling people about stuff, "You just can't do that."

K.K.: When did you first describe yourself as a feminist?

B.V.: Well, I think that was a word that people didn't really know for a long time. I suppose as soon as I joined NOW, as soon as I started going.

K.K.: What didn't you accomplish during your time as an activist that you wish you had, if anything?

B.V.: Oh, I don't know. I'm not so sure that you could say with any definite knowledge that something was really done. I mean it continues on, it continues on, and continues on, and continues on. As I say, it's your attitude, it's the way you deal with people, it's the way you expect them to deal with you, I mean that goes on forever. So, I don't know that anything that like, [pounds on table] "We definitely did blah, blah." I don't know that you could say that. I think that you changed a lot, I think it forced other people to change a lot, or even if they didn't change a lot it they know that they can't get away with this shit anymore, so they have to change their attitudes or at least their actions. I think there's a lot of that actually, change their actions but not their attitude.

K.K.: Is that how you feel your work contributed to women in the long run?

B.V.: Yeah.

K.K.: Along the lines of attitude and raising awareness.

B.V.: Sure. Sure, and it continues, it continues on, and there's—We have a kid at church now and she is playing varsity basketball. She goes to Jones, and you know, this kid is probably going to get a

basketball scholarship to college. Now, this was pretty unknown back then because there was mostly no varsity girls nothing.

K.K.: Before Title IX, yeah.

B.V.: Right, so, she knows with pretty good certainty that she's probably going to do that. There's a lot of stuff like that, just like all the stuff we've talked about. People didn't know about it then and they take it for granted now and it's sort of like ongoing and I think a lot of stuff is ongoing.

K.K.: While we're sort of talking about current, so what did the recent election season tell us about the status of women's right today?

B.V.: Oh, yes! I was so happy. I was so pleased to see that women were not going to let them do this to them, you know, I was so happy. They get them women out there, and I mean, here we have the wonderful Michelle out there and—got to love Michelle—and look, she came out of a perfectly ordinary family, perfectly ordinary, little black girl from the Southside, perfectly ordinary family, and look it, and him too, and I think that it's been, this whole idea that women were going to vote for this mope, who was trying to take so much away from women, and we had just gotten used to it, so, no, no, sorry. We're not doing that. I was so happy, so happy that, well you think you've tricked women? Well, you haven't. Ken

K.K.: Have you seen—because obviously on the news they talked about how the vote of the young woman, and young women being involved in politics, definitely contributed to Barack Obama winning a second term, but they were often called, like, “One-issue voters”. Do you have an opinion about that? Because, basically they said like, people were arguing that young women only voted how they did because of reproductive rights and abortions, so do you have anything, do you have any thoughts on that?

B.V.: I'm not so sure being a one-issue voter is such a good thing, because you got these wacky anti-abortion people who are serious one-issue voters and it is unfortunate, you know. I don't really know too many young women. I don't—I know lots of old women. I don't come in contact with very many so that I have any idea what they think about stuff. I don't think that people are as, except for the wacky anti-abortion people, I don't think people are that one-issued as you think they are.

K.K.: Or as they were arguing.

B.V.: Right. I think that self-interest, that was a word I learned in the women's movement, I think they have more self-interest than just one thing and, that that election was very, very clear how the President felt about things for people, women, men, whatever, and how this other mope felt about things. And I think especially lately, I mean when Romney made his first forty-seven percent, [mimicking] “Well, we don't care about them,” that's really true, he doesn't. He absolutely doesn't, he didn't, he doesn't, and his latest comment about, [mimicking] “Well, he's just going to give them things. Well he just bought them with healthcare and education and,” what is wrong with you? You wonder why you didn't win. I mean it has been ever so clear, ever so clear, how he really felt about the forty-seven percent. You know, “You just bought them. You just bought them,” well what should happen with these people they should not have healthcare, they should not have an education? I mean, talk about outrageous. Well, the thing that I think about him is, I think he really

thinks he's okay. He really thinks he's a nice guy, and the kindest thing we can say about him is that he's a jerk and a few words that a lovely older lady such as myself wouldn't say. So, I don't think it was just one-issue at all, even if you're interested in having your birth control pills, which frankly, I think is a very good idea, to encourage people to do that, you know, it's not just your birth control bills, everybody has other kinds of health issues, and if you're not going to get any health coverage—and even if you're quite young, there's things that you need. I was in Benefits for the better part of my life, so I'm interested when they're talking about healthcare and I graduated from the University of Illinois and worked in the Benefits Center, so after I graduated from college, you know, it was one of reasons why I was able to get that job, because I had the degree, but mostly because I knew all about insurance. So, I do not believe that most people are just one-issue voters. I think they have some idea about other things and how they want their lives to be and how they want the world to be.

K.K.: In what ways do you think that the women's movement altered mainstream American culture and institutions?

B.V.: Oh, well, all the ways we've talked about. All sorts of ways. All sorts of ways. I think that little girls today, although they might decide they want to be a princess when they're five, before too very long they're realizing that there's not a great call for princesses, but they might want to be a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, something. Every possible way. Every possible way, and I think it's much better for people. One of the things that I'd really like to see and that is you will see fathers, okay, fathers of children that are very actively involved in their lives. They're schlepping around these little kids stuck on your chest. You're the one who's taking the kid out if he's crying, you see fathers everywhere, and I think that is such a good thing for children, to have these fathers be very active in the lives of their children. And that didn't just happen, it wasn't, "Oh gee, maybe I'll learn how to change diapers," I think that's an attitude. That's an attitude, and the idea that we don't think it's unusual, for instance, to have a lady dentist, or whatever, I mean, you just don't think that's really odd anymore. It's just the way it is, so everything has changed, everything.

K.K.: And, so, and this is backtracking just a little bit, but how did the men in your life react to you being an activist? Or how did they respond?

B.V.: Well, I didn't hang around with any men who wouldn't respond well. There have been over the years an awful lot of men in my life, they come, they go, you know, but not anybody that wouldn't respond well to that. Because that's always been—that was just part of it. I pretty much am—I'm a big mouth, I am. I'll tell you all kinds of stuff you might want to know, and it might upset you, but I'll do it anyway, I would tell anybody if his fly was open. I would tell you that. I might whisper in your ear, but I'd tell you that. So, there would be nobody who would have any interest in me because they would know that we would probably not get along very well because of that. Quite a while ago now, before we got internet dating, we used to have little ads in the newspaper, and I answered an ad, and it was guy who said he was opinionated, and he was also ten years younger than I am, and he liked to ride a bicycle. Well I thought, Well, I'll see, I can ride my bicycle with him or something. And he was opinionated in all of the same ways I was, so for the time we were together it was perfectly lovely. We rode our bicycles, we did all kinds of stuff, we agreed. So, there's lots of men out there that do agree. I mean, you'll find men all the time that say, "Look, I have daughters, I have three daughters." I don't know, right now we hang around with a lot of old women and old gay guys, **Ed**, who might so up here soon, he's bringing me something, he was just outraged by the idea that anyone would vote for Romney who wouldn't agree to women's

health issues. [Impersonating] “*How* could you do that?” So, I mean, if you’re the father of daughters, I mean you have to, you have to want to have this for your daughters. I think that, I mean I wouldn’t want to sit here on some low-lives, but they’re not the sort that you’d want to spend any time with.

K.K.: For you, what does it mean to be a feminist now, today?

B.V.: Well now today, gee! It means I have a lot of very good woman friends a lot for whom I’ve had for years, and years, and years, that go back to when I joined NOW, it means that we have, attitudes about stuff that we, that there should be equality for men and women and that women should get an equal shake at everything, and I think it’s an attitude. It’s an attitude. The other thing is that I think, for the most part, feminists are not your shrinking violets, we are the ones who are mouthy and even now, we’re, even now, doing stuff. My activities more recently have been very, very local. I work in the Alderman’s office. I’m very interested in my neighborhood, more so than the larger areas around me, so that’s my focus right now is my neighborhood, and I’m the one that’s going to watch over stuff, I’m the one that’s going to, unless it was someone who was big and mean and terribly frightening, I’m the one that’s going to say, “Look, you can’t do that.” I think clearly, it’s an attitude. We got it, and it’s never going to go away, and you’re to find us even when we’re much older than we are now, and we’re still going to be doing whatever we can.

K.K.: I’ve heard it said recently that feminism is the radical notion that women are people.

B.V.: [Laughs] Alright.

K.K.: [Laughs] I thought you might enjoy that.

B.V.: Yeah, that’s good. I mean, I think that you will find that anyone who is a feminist is outspoken and they can be outspoken about anything. I don’t think it’s going to stop and you could find very old ladies that are going to do it, and just the idea that whatever it is, we need to take some action, you know, the hydrant’s dripping down at the end of the block. You know, I called in and I talked about that. Whatever it is. Whatever it is, you have to stick your nose in there and something about it because there’s a lot of people like, “Wah, wah. the hydrant’s dripping. Maybe we’ll, meh, meh.” I would never to that. I would never not do something about almost anything that needed something done about it.

K.K.: What advice do you have for young women today?

B.V.: Well, my advice is, be alert, the county needs alerts, go to school, get an education, be prepared to take care of yourself. You know, I have two ex-husbands, I have no children, you have to be able to take care of yourself, so don’t think that a man’s going to come along and take care of you because even if that happens, then all of a sudden he drops dead as he walks down the stairs or something and you’re thirty-seven years old, so you need to be prepared, you need to be alert, you need to be aware of what’s going on around you, local, city, state, nation, whatever, you need to pay attention to what’s going on. You can’t just sit back and think, “Oh, well.” Keep moving, keep moving and aggravating people as much as possible, that’s what I always say! I try to keep moving and aggravating people as much as possible.

K.K.: And so, is there anything else that you would like to say—

B.V.: I don't think so.

K.K.: —For this project about your activism or anything, really.

B.V.: I don't think so. I think I've talked about almost everything, stuff I haven't thought about in an awfully long time. No, I mean, you have to be engaged in your life. This is your life, it is not a rehearsal. This is it. You have to be prepared, be alert, pay attention to what's going on around you.

K.K.: Okay, well. That's pretty much, that's all I have. That's it. Yeah. Yep.

*[End of recording.]*